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Complaint: Firefighters Forced To Participate In Gay Pride Parade

POSTED: 8:05 pm PDT August 6, 2007
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SAN DIEGO -- Four San Diego city firefighters have filed a complaint with the state said their superiors forced them to participate in last month's gay pride parade, it was reported Tuesday.

An attorney for the four sent a letter to the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing on Aug. 1 requesting the right to file a sexual harassment lawsuit against the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, according to The San Diego Union-Tribune.

The men claim their battalion chief ordered them to ride in the July 21 parade through San Diego's Hillcrest neighborhood, according to their attorney, Stephen Stirling. The firefighters followed the order out of concern they would otherwise be suspended or punished.

Their lawyers sent a letter Wednesday to the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing seeking right-to-sue notices, a first step toward a lawsuit. The Thomas More Law Center, a conservative Christian legal organization based in Michigan, is helping represent the plaintiffs.

Fire department spokesman Maurice Luque said the four men, who were assigned to a fire station in the parade route area, were called in after another crew that had volunteered to participate canceled at the last minute because one firefighter had a family emergency.

Luque said the agency's engines had participated in San Diego's LGBT Pride Festival for the past 15 years and never had any complaints.

"At the last minute the crew in that community was asked to step up and represent our agency in the parade," he said. "We have a responsibility and we take it seriously to participate in these parades."

Luque said Fire Chief Tracy Jarman had met with the firefighters and had asked another city department to investigate their claims.

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During the parade, the firefighters said, bystanders taunted them with sexually explicit comments and colleagues called to tease them for participating in the event.

"I was forced into a situation that would compromise what I hold true and what I believe in," engineer Jason Hewitt said in a statement.

The four contend the department failed to protect them from sexual harassment and didn't immediately act to correct the situation, Stirling said.

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